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Memo

**THE OPERATIONS OF THE 894TH TANK DESTROYER
BATTALION (II CORPS) IN THE BATTLE OF KAS-
SERINE PASS, 19-26 FEBRUARY 1943**

(*14. 152*
CO. Commander)

**Type of operation described: TANK DESTROYER
BATTALION IN DELAYING, DEFENSIVE, FLANK
SECURITY ACTIONS IN MOUNTAINOUS TERRAIN**

**Lt. Col. David L. Ramsey, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I**

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PREFACE

The author wishes to express his gratitude and thanks to the former members of the 894th TD Battalion stationed at Ft. Benning, Georgia, and living in Columbus, Georgia, for the helpful aid rendered in the review of the operations of the battalion in the Tunisian Campaign.

THE OPERATIONS OF THE 894TH TANK DESTROYER
BATTALION (II CORPS) IN THE BATTLE OF KAS-
SERINE PASS, 19-26 FEBRUARY 1943

ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operation of the 894th Tank Destroyer Battalion (II Corps Troops) in the Battle of Kasserine Pass, Tunisia, 19-26 February 1943, during the Tunisian Campaign.

Prior to a discussion of this operation, it is desirable to review for the reader the events leading up to the period covered by this presentation.

On entry of the United States into World War II, the combined Chiefs of Staff (British Empire and United States representation) was organized in Washington, D. C. to plan and direct the strategic prosecution of the Allied combined effort in global warfare. The first decision of this staff was the establishment as first priority the defeat of the European Axis and second the defeat of Japan. (1)-

Early in 1942 the Combined Chiefs of Staff set a tentative target date for the invasion of the European Continent by crossing the English Channel in the summer of 1943. (2) Studies in the spring of 1942 of the manpower and equipment required to launch and maintain a force in Europe revealed that these requirements would not be available in sufficient quantity to sustain this tentative planned operation; therefore, the Combined Chiefs of Staff set back the date to 1944

(1) A - p. 28-29

(2) C - p. 1

for the invasion of Europe. (3)

In view of the pressure placed on the Allied Nations by Russia for a second front and the psychological reaction in the United States and Great Britain to the defeats suffered by the Allies, the Combined Chiefs of Staff planned the invasion of North Africa in the Fall of 1942. This invasion was to be known as Operation Torch. (4)

Operation Torch had a number of strategic objectives:

1. Clearing the Mediterranean supply routes for use by the Allied Nations in the global war.

2. To deprive the German and Italian nations of food and materials from the African continent.

3. To provide Allied bases for attack on the southern European coast.

4. To reconstitute the French Army in North Africa for use in the Allied effort in Europe. (5)

Of political necessity Operation Torch had to be carried out by American forces inasmuch as the colonial Frenchman held mixed feeling toward Great Britain for its recognition of the "Free French Movement" under General Charles de Gaulle and not of the "French Liberation Movement" in North Africa under General Henri Girard. Due to personality clash between the two French Generals, it was considered that the American effort would be more successful in welding the French movements together. (6)

General Dwight D. Eisenhower was named as commander-in-chief for Operation Torch with his Allied Force Headquarters established in London during the planning phase. The plan

(3) A - p. 68-70

(4) A - p. 69

(5) C - p. 3

(6) C - p. 4-5

for this operation designated the capture of Casablanca in French Morocco by the Western Task Force under command of Major General George S. Patton to be lifted from the United States; the Center Task Force under command of Major General Lloyd R. Fredendall to be lifted from the British Isles to capture Oran, Algeria; the Eastern Task Force under command of Major General Charles W. Ryder to be lifted from the British Isles to capture Algiers, Algeria. The Center and Western Task Forces consisted solely of American Army Troops whereas the Eastern Task Force was composed of half American and half British Troops. On capture of the initial objectives the Center and Western Task Force were to unite to counter any attack that might be launched by the Axis powers thru Spain and Spanish Morocco. The Western Task Force after the capture of Algiers was to pass to the command of Lieutenant General Sir Kenneth A. N. Anderson (Br) as the British First Army for a thrust into Tunisia to capture the port towns of Bizerte and Tunis. (7)

At dawn of 8 November 1942, all three task forces began landings on their objectives and by 10 November had taken their objectives. (8) The Western and Center Task Forces moved to security the Spanish Morocco border. The Eastern Task Force became the British First Army under Lieutenant General Anderson. Units of the British First Army seized by joint sea and airborne attacks the port towns of Bougie (11 November), Bone (12 November) and Djidjelli (13 November). The force taking Bone moved eastward along the coastal road

(7) C - p. 7
(8) A - p. 107

to take Tabarka on 15 November; moved on to Dj. Abied by the 17th there joining with a small French force from Souk el Arba. Here forward movement was halted by increasing enemy resistance and the lack of supplies and troops to maintain momentum. Movement of supplies and troops was critical due to poor road and rail systems into Tunisia. Resupply was further handicapped by the arrival of the rainy season which begins in November and extends through to February. Every means was used to build up the British First Army in an effort to take Bizerte and Tunis before Christmas. The offensive bogged down in the Tunisian mud and was halted by General Eisenhower on 24 December 1942. (9)

During January of 1943 the race to build up forces and supplies by the Allied and Axis powers was in full swing. The Axis held the advantages in this race because of the shorter supply routes and all weather airfields held around Bizerte and Tunis. (10)

The offensive up to this time had been carried out by mixed American, British and French units. During this lull in hostilities a sorting out of units was undertaken with the assignment of sectors to each of the nations involved. The British V Corps was assigned the northern Sector on an 80 mile front, the French XIX the center sector on a 50 mile front and the American II Corps the southern sector on a 150 mile front. By 14 February 1943, the front line was as shown in Map B. (11) The German Army under Field Marshall Rommel had been driven back from Egypt by the British Eighth Army and was prepared for a defensive stand on the Mareth line. (See Map B) (12)

(9) A - p. 116-124

(10) C - p. 24-25

(11) C - p. 24-28

(12) B - p. 8

THE GENERAL SITUATION

Early in February Allied intelligence anticipated an attack by a strong German force thru Fondouk Pass between the French and American sectors. (13) Allied troops were concentrated in this area to stop the attack. The German attack developed on 14 February from Faïd Pass against positions lightly held by the 168th RCT of the 34th Division and GCA of the 1st Armored Division. By 17 February the American units had been driven back to Sheitla. A secondary attack was launched further south against Gafsa which drove to Feriana and Thelpte by the 17th. (14)

On 16 February, General Anderson ordered the II Corps to hold on a defensive line along the Western Dorsal mountain range. (15)

DISPOSITION AND PLAN OF THE AMERICAN II CORPS

To carry out the defense order given to II Corps, the Corps plan called for the defense of the Kasserine and Bou Chebka passes which were the only two avenues of approach thru the Western Dorsal in the Corps sector. The 1st Infantry Division (less 18th CT) with supporting troops was assigned the defensive mission, while the 1st Armored Division was to concentrate in the vicinity of Tebessa to reorganize and equip to constitute a mobile force available to stop a break thru in the Western Dorsal defense. During the period of 14-19 February, the American forces had lost approximately 117 tanks, 38 towed and self-propelled artillery pieces, 303

(13) A - p. 140

(14) G - p. 28-30

(15) H - p. 35

wheeled and half-track vehicles, and from 1500 to 2000 men.

(16) From these figures it is readily apparent the need of reorganizing and re-equipping the only mobile striking force at this critical time. The bulk of the 1st Infantry Division was concentrated at Bon Chebka leaving only a small force known as Stark force to defend Kasserine Pass. Stark Force consisted of the 26th CT (less 2nd and 3rd Battalions) 19th Combat Engineer Battalion (less 1 Company) Companies L and K of the 39th Infantry (9th Division) and the 33rd F A Battalion. This small force was attacked by patrols in force of the German 21st Panzer Division on 19 February. (17)

KASSERINE PASS AND VALLEY TERRAIN

Kasserine Pass is formed by the Oued Hatob which runs through the Western Dorsal range 6 miles northwest of the town of Kasserine. The two shoulders of the pass tower approximately 1500-2000 feet above the floor of Kasserine Valley. The floor of Kasserine Valley is practically flat divided by the Oued Hatob which runs to the west through the center of the valley and is crisscrossed by numerous wadis which run in a north-south direction. The valley is completely surrounded by mountains lightly covered with scrub growth. The road from the town of Kasserine to the west forks at the east of Kasserine Pass; the north branch runs through the valley to the north toward Thala and LeKef, the other through the valley to the west to Haidra and Tebessa. (18) These roads being constructed of crushed rock and clay were in poor condition due to the heavy rains and military traffic.

(17) F - Estimate of situation

(18) Personal knowledge

ORGANIZATION OF THE 894TH TANK DESTROYER BATTALION

The battalion was organized into five companies; Headquarters Company, Reconnaissance Company, 3 gun companies: A, B, and C. The Headquarters Company contained the administrative and service elements of the battalion. The Reconnaissance Company had one pioneer platoon and three reconnaissance platoons equipped with motorcycles, 1/4 ton and half-track vehicles. The gun companies each had two heavy TD Platoons equipped with half-tracks mounting 75 mm guns and one light platoon equipped with the 3/4 Ton Weapons Carriers mounting 37 mm guns. Each of the gun platoons had its own security squad mounted in 1/4 ton vehicles. (19)

SITUATION OF THE 894TH TANK DESTROYER BATTALION

The battalion closed in a heavy forrest area 10 miles east of Tebessa on the afternoon of 19 February 1943, completed a four day motor march from Oren, Algeria. On arrival in the bivouac area the unit was informed that it would remain in Corps reserve for approximately 48 hours and was directed to prepare for combat action. (20)

NARRATION

MOVEMENT TO KASSERINE PASS

At approximately 1900 hours, 19 February, the battalion commander was called to Corps Headquarters to be briefed on the situation and to receive a movement order. In the absence of the battalion commander, every man of the battalion

(19) Personal knowledge

(20) Personal knowledge

was pressed into action to place all equipment in combat readiness. An hour later the battalion commander returned with the mission to reconnoiter east of Dj Hamra in the Kasserine Valley. The battalion moved from the bivouac area at 2000 hours to Bekkaria then north and east over a poor trail to Dj Hamra in order of Reconnaissance, A, C, and B Companies. The vehicles of the Reconnaissance Company being lighter than those of the gun companies were capable of moving well out in front to begin reconnaissance in Kasserine Valley. When the Reconnaissance Company cleared the pass at Dj Hamra, radio communication was mask by the mountains. To alleviate this condition, the Battalion Commander ordered the command vehicle of Headquarters Company equipped with its long range radio to be sent to join the Battalion Command Post for use as a relay station between the Reconnaissance Company and the Battalion Command Post. (21)

By morning of 20 February, all gun companies were moving forward through Kasserine Valley to positions 2 miles west of Kasserine Pass with a mission of stopping enemy armor that might penetrate the Stark Force defensive position. The battalion was in position by 1630 hours at which time the Stark Force positions were being overrun by German infantrymen who had encircled the positions from both flanks by crossing the mountain tops. (22) Without infantry protection, Commanding General, II Corps ordered the withdrawal of the 33rd FA and 894th TD Battalion to Dj Hamra to defend the passes there. The remnants of Stark Force withdrew to the north to Thala.

(See Map C)

(21) Personal knowledge

(22) F - G-2 Estimate, Feb 18 to 24.

When the battalion moved out into Kasserine Valley, the commanding officer sent a message to the commanding officer of Headquarters Company by motorcycle messenger but due to the muddy roads the messenger was six hours enroute to the rear echelon, a distance of approximately 20 miles. (23) On receipt of the message directing the selection of a rear echelon area in the vicinity of Haidra, the commanding officer Headquarters Company departed for this area leaving the Battalion Motor Sergeant in charge as no officer was available for duty as Headquarters Company executive officer. The company commander completed his reconnaissance, reported to the Battalion Command Post at approximately 2100 hours on the 20th. The Battalion Command Post had been moved out of Kasserine Valley to its new location along the Kasserine-Haidra road behind the Dj Hamra pass. On his arrival there, he was informed that the Battalion S-1 had been sent to the rear echelon to bring back every available man with exception of one driver per rear echelon vehicle and the battalion maintenance section to man weapons in the defensive positions. Commanding Officer, Headquarters Company was also informed that the S-1 was instructed to start the rear echelon movement to Haidra. After being briefed on the battle situation he was directed to proceed to Haidra to intercept the rear echelon vehicles and guide them into the area approved by the Battalion Commanding Officer. When the Headquarters Company commander arrived at Haidra about midnight, he found that the 1st Armored Division had priority on the road and that all other units had been ordered off. After inquiring of a number of Military Police road

(23) F - G-2, Estimate Feb 18th to 24th

guides he was finally directed to an area west of Haidra where the rear echelon vehicles were parked in an open field a mile short of the covered bivouac selected in the afternoon reconnaissance. All drivers were awakened and directed in the covered bivouac area before dawn due to danger of enemy air attacks. (24)

DEFENSE OF PASSES THROUGH DJ HAMRA

Under cover of darkness on the night of 20 February, the battalion withdrew in compliance with the Corps directive to Dj Hamra leaving Company B plus 5 tanks of I Company, 13th Armored Regiment in position astride the Kasserine-Haidra road approximately 10 miles east of Dj Hamra. The mission of B Company was to delay the enemy while the defensive positions were being prepared. The position occupied ^{by the Bn or 13 Co?} was in a wadi that ran perpendicular to the road making excellent hull defilade positions for the SP vehicles. Under cover of the delaying force the remainder of the battalion started construction of the defensive positions for a 'last ditch' stand. Mine fields were laid in the road approaches into the Kasserine-Haidra road pass by Reconnaissance and C Companies. A Company moved on to the north to defend the pass leading to Thala. All SP weapons were placed in hull defiladed positions to cover the approaches and manned only by the gunner and loader while the other crew members, security squads, and personnel from the rear echelon dug in rifle and machine gun positions. (See Map C) Construction of defensive positions were carried on throughout the night without hinderance from the enemy. (25)

(24) Personal knowledge

(25) Personal knowledge

Commanding General II Corps ordered CCB of the 1st Armored Division to move to Dj Hamra to take command of all troops south of Oued Hateb at 1805 hours of 20 February. The first unit of CCB to arrive in the valley was the 2nd Battalion, 6th Armored Infantry Regiment which took up positions at 0010 hours, 21 February, defending the trail leading to the south toward Bou Chebka. (26) These positions were further strengthened by the arrival of the 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry at dawn. (27)

FIRE FIGHT OF THE OUTPOST COMPANY

At approximately 0200 hours on 21 February, B Company in its outpost position picked up the sound of armored vehicles approaching the position. All tanks and TD's were alerted, to fire only on the command of the company commander inasmuch as he had been cautioned not to fire on any friendly troops that might be moving back from Kasserine Pass. When the approaching vehicles were within 200 yards of the company position, commands being given in English could be heard but when the lead vehicles drew nearer the German cross was recognized and the fire order given. The armored patrol was taken under fire by all guns of the company at point blank range and after an hours fire fight the enemy withdrew to the east. B Company suffered approximately 10 casualties killed, wounded and captured and the loss of two light SP's, one by direct hit on the chassis. Due to darkness accurate evaluation of damage to the enemy patrol could not be made. The Company

(26) F - Operation Journal entry of 21 February

(27) G - S-1 Journal entry of 21 February

Commander estimated the strength of the enemy patrol to be 30 to 40 vehicles. (28) The battalion ambulance carrying the Battalion Surgeon and 3 aidmen went forward from the Battalion Command Post to care for the wounded. While caring for the wounded, all were captured by the enemy. (29) Company B saw no further sign of the enemy and was ordered back at dawn and attached to the 2nd Battalion, 13th Armored Regiment which had arrived in position south of the 894th TD Battalion during the morning hours. (30)

On the morning of 21 February the Battalion Commanding Officer ordered all remaining motorcycles of the Battalion which had not been abandoned in the Tunisian mud to be turned into the rear echelon of the battalion as no use could be made of them; further attempted use would have resulted in the loss of the remainder. (31)

STRENGTHENING OF THE DJ HAMRA DEFENSIVE POSITION

During daylight of 21 February the build-up of the CCB defensive position was continued with only minor enemy attacks probing the Dj Hamra defenses. All positions were placed in readiness for the main enemy attack. The enemy unable to find a soft spot in the defenses south of Oued Hatob turned his attack to the north against Thala where bitter fighting of tank versus tank took place on 22 February. (32)

Throughout the 21st and 22nd the Battalion occupied its defensive positions in support of the CCB units. On the 23rd

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- (28) Personal knowledge
 - (29) Personal knowledge
 - (30) E - Operation Journal entry of 21 February
 - (31) Personal knowledge
 - (32) C - p. 31-32

CCB directed the battalion to establish out guard posts with the light platoons on the trail to the north toward Thala and to assemble the remainder of the battalion back of the main pass through Dj Hamra. Anticipating the withdrawal of the enemy through Kasserine Pass the Battalion Commanding Officer requested permission of CCB to send a patrol around the right flank to the heights overlooking the pass. The request was approved and the battalion patrol of approximately 35 men under control of the 1st Sergeant of C Company was sent out on the 23rd. When the patrol was half way to the Pass, radio communications was lost. The patrol continued to its objective only to sit and watch the enemy pull out. (33)

THE ATTACK ON KASSERINE PASS

CCB attacked at dawn on 24 February with the 894th TD Battalion assigned the flank security along the southern edge of the valley. (34) In the advance the only resistance encountered by the battalion was infantry outpost located in the valley and in the draws leading to the south into the mountains. The move forward was slowed by the tedious work of the security squads and reconnaissance platoons in flushing out the enemy outposts in the rugged terrain on the right flank. By noon on 25 February Kasserine Pass was taken by CCB. (See Map D)

THE DEFENSE OF KASSERINE PASS

The 16th RCT came up from CCB's right flank to defend

(33) Personal knowledge

(34) E - Operation Journal entry of 23 February

the Kasserine Pass on 26 February while units of the 1st Armored Division reorganized for further action to the south. The 894th was attached to the 16th RCT to strengthen the Pass against possible counterattack. (35) The Reconnaissance Platoons of the battalion equipped with all available mine detectors were used to assist the Engineer troops in clearing the roads of mines east of the Pass toward Sbeitla and Feriana, while the battalion SP's remained in positions overwatching the approaches to Kasserine Pass. (36)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. COMMUNICATIONS

In mountainous terrain many new problems of communications are encountered by mechanized units in open type warfare such as was evident in Tunisia. In the initial move into Kasserine Valley the battalion was unable to maintain communications with the reconnaissance elements because of the high mountainous land masses between transmitters and receivers. To remove this difficulty the battalion rear echelon was deprived of its only radio means of communication with the battalion command post. To regain communications forward of the command post the rear echelon radio was used as a relay station. Without radio communications with the rear echelon the battalion commander had to rely on motorcycle messengers or officers as messengers utilizing 1/4 ton vehicles to deliver orders.

The dispatch of orders to Headquarters Company Commander to reconnoiter for a new rear echelon delayed the movement of

(35) E - Operation Journal entry of 25 February

(36) Personal knowledge

the rear echelon by six hours due to the messenger's difficulty in covering the 20 mile distance over muddy roads on motorcycle. Movement six hours earlier would have placed the rear echelon in the new area ahead of the priority road movement of the 1st Armored Division and would have been in more accessible position to assist the battalion in preparation of the defensive positions on Dj Hamra.

The use of motorcycles for communication in other instances also meant delay because of the muddy roads found throughout the area.

The mission of the patrol sent to the position overlooking Kasserine Pass failed because it was unable to communicate with the parent organization. The limited range of the radio carried by the patrol doomed it to failure. Had the range factor been considered, additional radios could have been carried forward to establish relay stations along the route over which information of prime importance would have greatly aided in the attack down the valley.

2. TRAINING

In the preparation of defensive positions on Dj Hamra the battalion commander recognized the vulnerability of the unit in a defensive situation without infantry to protect against enemy infiltration. To make up for this deficiency he used all available personnel to supplement the rifleman in the security squads and the reconnaissance platoons. During the period the organization was in England waiting the arrival of its heavy equipment, extensive infantry weapons training had been conducted for all personnel in the battalion. This training was not only valuable in the defense but also in the mopping up

of enemy pockets on the right flank during the attack.

During the build-up of the CCB defense position the battalion could have assisted the Combat Command in firing artillery missions with the SP 75 mm guns which were the regular French 75 mm field guns slightly modified and installed on half-track vehicles. The battalion could not offer this additional support role because of the fact none of the battalion personnel had been trained in indirect fire methods. This lack of training was not overlooked but merely the results of untimely supply just prior to departure from Oran of the indirect sights for the guns.

The failure of Company B to identify the approaching armored patrol until it was almost in the delaying position can be contributed to the lack of outpost personnel untrained in identification of enemy equipment under cover of darkness. This can not rightly be called a failure inasmuch as the unit did gain complete surprise and forced the enemy to withdraw and delaying his attack against Dj Hamra.

In the final analysis it is evident that specialized combat units must be capable of performing many roles outside its special roles.

LESSONS

1. Unit rear echelons must be provided with means of reliable and rapid communications with the command post at all times.

2. In mountainous terrain where open warfare is encountered, additional radios should be provided motorized units to serve as relay stations between the command post

and elements of the unit.

3. Patrols sent beyond the range of available radios must be supplemented by additional radios and operating personnel to establish relay stations along the routes.

4. In combat areas having poor roads, motorcycles should be replaced by 1/4 ton vehicles during the rainy seasons.

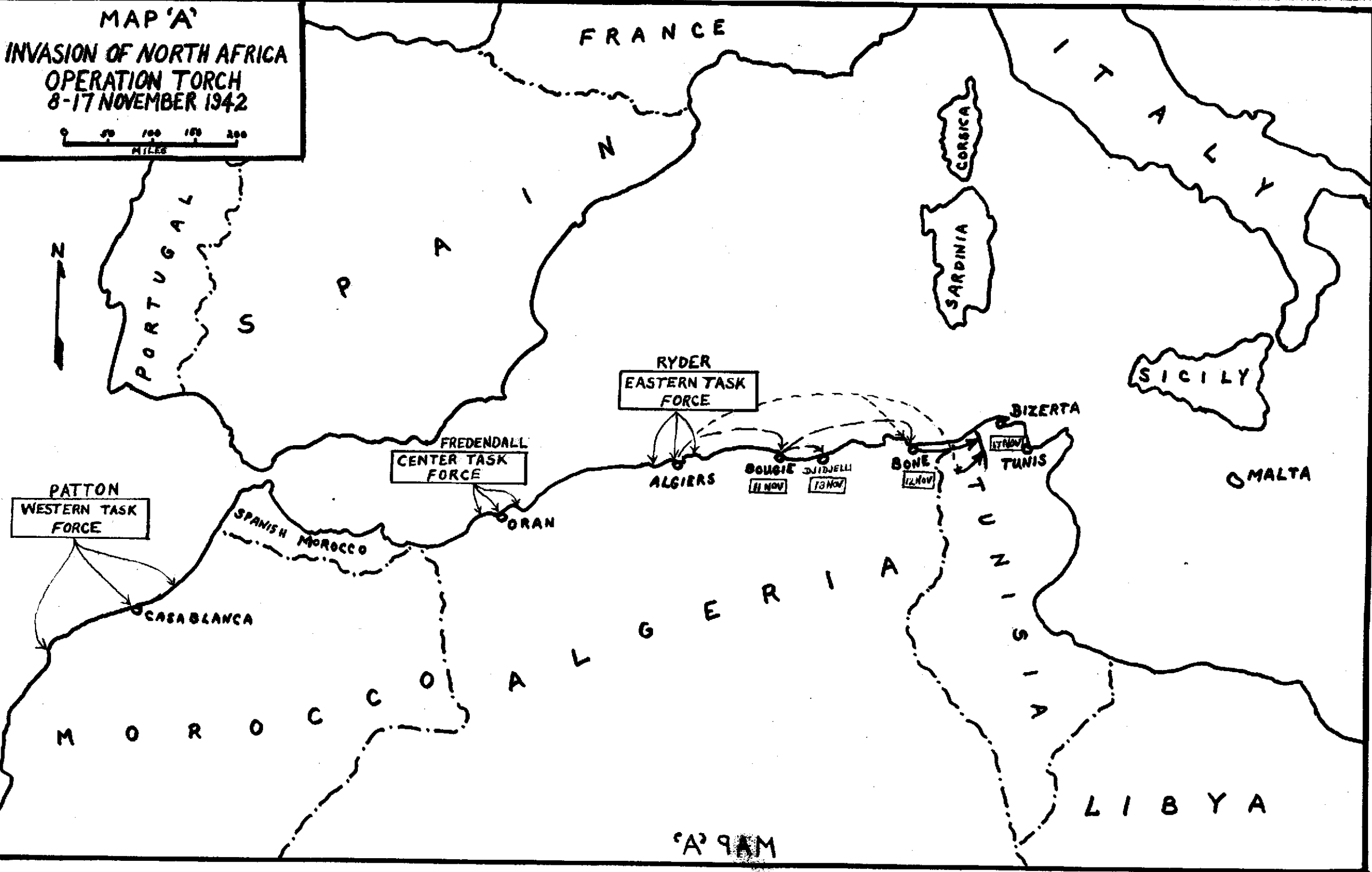
5. Personnel of special motorized units must be trained to fight on the ground as infantrymen.

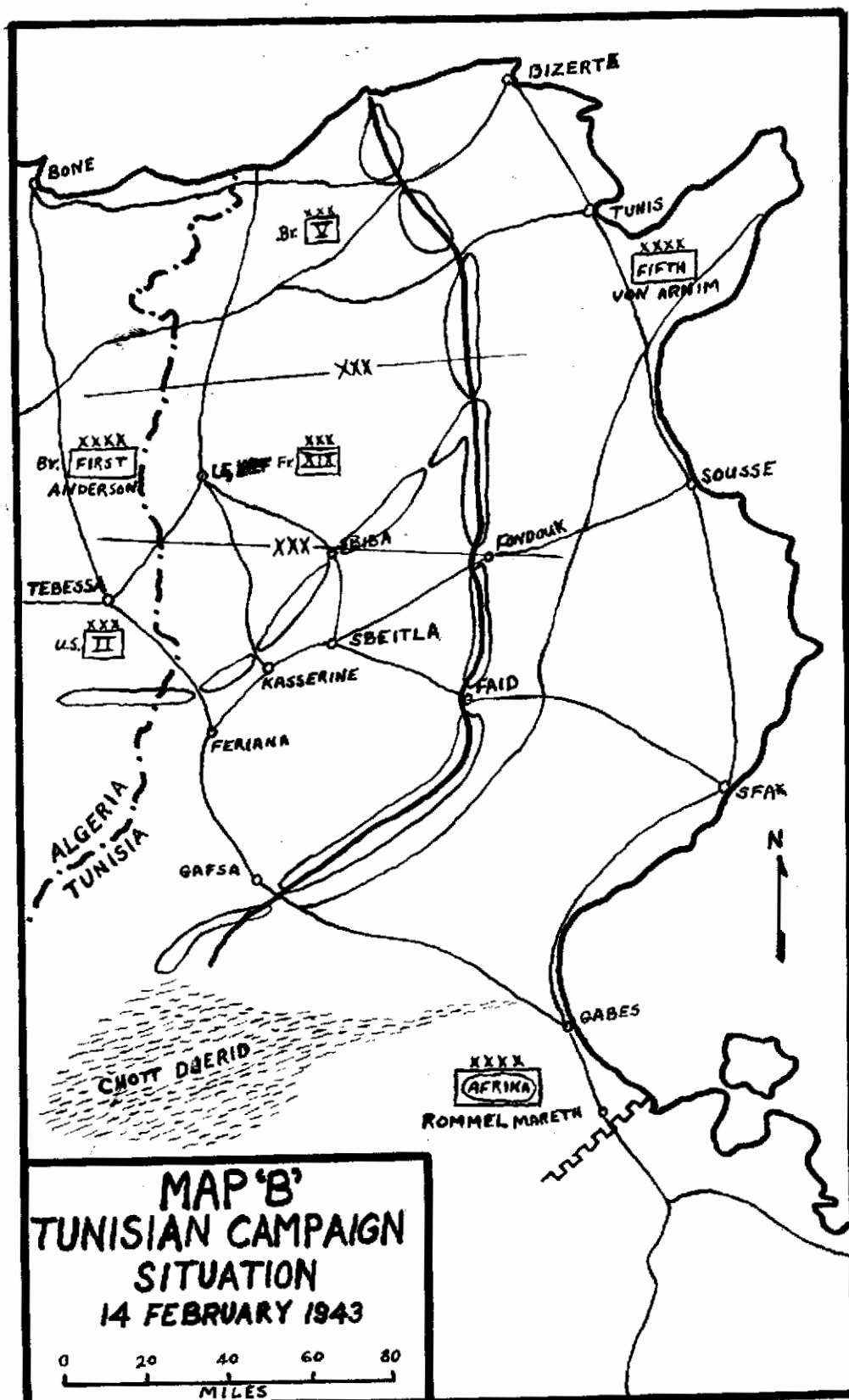
6. Units equipped with SP weapons having artillery capabilities must be trained in indirect fire procedure.

7. Personnel placed on outpost duty during hours of darkness must be trained in equipment identification and night vision.

MAP 'A'
INVASION OF NORTH AFRICA
OPERATION TORCH
8-17 NOVEMBER 1942

0 50 100 150 200
MILES





MAP 'B'